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Morris, Robert Hugh

The power of public
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The Power of Public Opinion

Sermon Delivered

Sunday Evening, November 24, 1912

in the

Central-North Broad Street Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

by the Pastor

The Rev. Robert Hugh Morris

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THE POWER OF PUBLIC OPINION.

Sermon delivered Sunday evening, November 24, 1912, in the Central-North Broad Street Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, by the Pastor, the Rev. Robert Hugh Morris.

"AS YE GO, PREACH."—MATT. 10:7.

Who rules in our country? The answer to this question will be as varied as the opinions and personalities of men. The most probable answer will be, the President. Others will go further and explain that the Congress makes the laws, and the President sees that they are executed; and that it is therefore really the Congress which rules. Again it is said that since the Supreme Court has the power to declare unconstitutional, and therefore null and void, any law which Congress sees fit to enact, that the ultimate power is vested in this Supreme Court.

A different line of answers will be given by others who brood upon the slow social progress being made in our country. They will tell us that the trusts rule. That these trusts have their ambassadors, their tools rather, in the Senate and House, and that these really dictate what laws shall be made and how the President shall execute those laws, and also how the Supreme Court shall construe them. Thus we are told that there is a combination of capital which controls the price of meats, another of grain, another of clothing, another of leather, another of sugar, and so on, and that all these combinations are more or less banded together for mutual protection and mutual interest. Sometimes we are more specifically told that there is a money trust, headed by no less person than J. P. Morgan. It is stated that this money trust is the supreme trust because it can dictate terms to all the other trusts. This, it is said, is the real ruler of our country, before whom presidents tremble.

Fearing to be misunderstood if we use, even by way of illustration, a very popular and doubtless erroneous view

as to our present Chief Executive's relationship to these trusts let us go back a few years to the days of President McKinley. Many people in this country believed almost literally, that Marcus A. Hanna went to the White House about 9 A. M. every day; demanded admission, stamped noisily into the President's private office, dictated to that cowering person what he should do that day, and stamped noisily out, slamming the door behind him. Of course, this is absurd, for no man could rule even the weakest of presidents in any such manner; still we use it to suggest the thoughts of a great many people with regard to the President, namely that he trembles at the name of any great man of power among the trusts.

There is an entirely different class of people who maintain that the supreme authority of our country lies in the Roman Catholic church. Certain rabid and preposterous journals of more or less scarecrow kind, are constantly preaching that the great cardinals of the Church decide how their people shall vote and therefore decide who are the people's law-makers and executives and they go further and claim that the trap is laid and will soon be sprung which will fasten the shackles of Rome itself about the American government, and hold it in bondage for ever and ever. *Notice that we are mentioning these various explanations which different people give, without stopping to refute what is said, and certainly without lending approbation thereto.*

Others tell us the newspapers of the country are the supreme power to which our friends who are frightened at the Roman scarecrow reply that these newspapers, too, are in the clutches of the Church, and that if anything derogatory to the good name of the Church happens, it is impossible to get it in any daily or weekly of any prominence in America. Still, a large number of people maintain that the newspaper is the King of America.

In reply to the question, "Who rules our Country?" the persifleurs have their facetious answers to make. Some say woman. Not so facetious as it might be thought, and

certainly woman's political power is increasing by great leaps and bounds, as, doubtless, it should. More facetiously, they tell us the children rule. More facetiously still, that the cook is the ruling factor in the household and therefore in the community and country.

May we be permitted to say that there is an element of truth in the contention and claim of each of these, but that no one of them is correct in full. The element in which each is correct is in this—that the little child in the household, the cook, the woman, the public schools, the newspapers, the Roman Catholic church, and in proportion to their numbers, the magnates of the trusts; Congress, the Senate, the cabinet, the supreme court and the President—all these contribute their part towards the formation of that, which under Almighty God is the ruling power in our country.

Lest we be misunderstood, since this is a Christian pulpit, we must so much digress as to add a footnote just here, to the effect that we hold and believe that amidst all the mutations and changes of human history,—the rising and falling of empires; the birth and death of peoples,—God rules over all. He is King and Eternal Sovereign, but in ruling He rules by laws, and one of the laws—rather let us personify it and say one of the *agents* commissioned by Almighty God to be His ruler amongst the people is this which we have in mind, namely *Public Opinion*.

Just here let us go back a bit and approach this great all-prevailing and under God, all-ruling power of public opinion from another angle. What rules the man? The answer is, ideas. When one idea so possesses and dominates a man that for the time being he may indeed be called "a man of one idea" (though like Edison in perfecting the electric light, he may have a thousand other ideas subsidiary in his mind, yet at the moment thinks of only one part of the problem of the incandescent light which is before him), that idea is the ruling factor of his life. Now the expression of the idea may be in word or some other form of work. What ideas are to the individual mind, so public opinion is

to the national mind. Arouse public opinion on any great theme, and even though the country may have a thousand other interests and a thousand other avenues of thought and expression, the one all-absorbing thought is the one that is in every heart and on every lip, and the nation may be said to be pursuing its one idea. When this comes to pass, those mighty cataclysms in the political and social world that are called revolutions, take place. Why the French Revolution? Because public opinion had been fashioned and formed, had been heated white hot at the forge of thought and had been hammered into shape by the tongues of orators and pens of writers, so that it now had the form of the guillotine,—destined, nay predestined, to decapitate monarchialism in France. Public opinion is against monarchy. Public opinion, which was once subservient to the aristocracy, and joyously stooped to kiss Monseigneur's feet,—that public opinion today holds in gross execration the very names of the great nobles.

Why the American Revolution? Colonists fostered and protected by the English government, and long loyal to it,—why are they breaking away? Public opinion has formed itself around this, that there should be "No taxation without representation." Why the war of the early sixties? Why the Proclamation of Emancipation? Why that huge struggle and battle-grasp between fraternal sections that only yesterday stood side by side in the Mexican wars, and only the day before were shoulder to shoulder at Bunker Hill and heart to heart at Valley Forge? Public opinion has formed itself around this great sentence of Lincoln: "This nation cannot exist half slave and half free."

May we lead up to this from another point of view. What fashions public opinion? On what forge is it wrought? So long as the individual feels in his heart his resentment and says no word of that resentment against wrongs, imaginary or real; just so long is there no public opinion, but only disconnected and therefore, powerless private judgment. That which expresses private opinion and fashions on the lips for other men, and wins the applause of every heart,

is human speech. How powerful is the *word*? When God is to train His people, He sends prophets, and apostles, and even His own Son to speak the *words*. We are prone to make distinctions between *words* and *deeds*, but, dear friends, words, when they are true words and words that ought to be spoken and must be spoken, such words *are* deeds. What the judge utters from the bench, what the statesman proclaims in the Senate halls, what the preacher speaks from the sacred desk, what the president states in his message, these are words. Words have builded empires, words have given crowns. Words have marshalled armies. Words have moved nations. Words, the words of prophets, apostles, and the Christ, have lifted and beautified the world. Now it is words spoken in the proper way and at the right time which make, mold, and hold public opinion. It is Patrick Henry crying: "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I. his Cromwell, and George III.—may do well to profit by their example," which crystalized the public opinion of America and gave us the Revolution, and this nation of which we are a part.

Now to be practical let us gather up the scattered ends and say to the young men who are present: It is possible for you, by harboring purity in your heart and by speaking true words for purity, for truth, for virtue, to create amongst those who are your companions and your work-fellows in life an atmosphere, a public opinion, that is so pure that things foul and indecent cannot live in it.

To the young women, it is possible for you from a pure heart to speak that word which will create public opinion in the circle in which you move; which will right wrongs, brighten dark spots, cleanse foul places, bring happiness to many of your unfortunate sisters.

To the older men and women, especially the householders and property owners, remember that under God the most powerful thing in this world is public opinion. With high, true and pure ideals in your heart for a clean city, for a righteous community, for a chance for every young man and every young woman, for a chance for those who

have already been driven into vice and shame,—it is possible for you, when you are sure of your facts, to speak the word which will help create public opinion, which will make shameful dens and houses of immorality impossible in your community. As you have seen when an old plank that has long been rotting on the ground, is turned over and the sunlight permitted to pour in where a moment before was darkness, slugs, and worms, and hideous, slimy, crawling things, frightened by the sunlight, scatter, and with all the speed possible, disappear; so when the light of public opinion is turned upon the saloon, the gambling hell, the indecent dance hall, the moral pest house, the brothel, these things scurry with all haste into the darkness from which they came.

Yes, that which can right wrongs in this country, is public opinion. Let us be sure that our own lives are right, that we are living and working for God and humanity. Let us be sure of our position, of our ground, and then let us not fear to speak, for verily, it may be said tonight, when public opinion is *thoroughly aroused and thoroughly incensed against their existence the great blight of so-called immediate woes and irremediable wrongs* of America shall certainly disappear as the bats and owls and other doleful creatures hide in dark places when the sun comes up. The social and moral vices; improper and inadequate legal enactment as to the labor of women and children, and even of men; the huge and improper dominance of persons of colossal fortunes; oppression, greed, and graft; and all other things of darker ages, shall be scattered in the presence of humanity's new day, the dawn of which broke when Christ was born, and the full daylight of which shall come when public opinion, formed from the spirit of Christ himself, shall have driven the last foe of the human body, the human mind, and the human heart and soul, into the hell where it belongs.

Be not afraid to speak for the right, for every word helps to make public opinion, and public opinion of the right kind is one of the greatest of the agents God is using to cleanse and save the world.

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